 [A quick lesson on the meaning of the word "allah" by Amer Zahr](http://www.civilarab.com/a-quick-lesson-on-allah/) by Louise

S. [2015, Apr 23]

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A quick lesson on “allah”

Amer Zahr

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March 24th, 2015

Last week, in upstate New York, many residents of a small town got all bent out of shape. Pine Bush High School decided to celebrate National Foreign Language Week by reciting the Pledge of Allegiance in a few different tongues. The plan was to have students narrate the pledge in Italian, Japanese, French, Spanish, and... yes, Arabic. Well, on Wednesday, an Arabic-speaking student took to the school’s intercom and pledged allegiance to the flag in her heritage’s language.

And exactly what you imagine might happen happened. Some students started hissing and booing, and a number of parents called the school in protest. By the end of the day, the principal announced an apology over the school’s intercom system. I guess these kids texted their parents. When I was growing up, we didn’t have cell phones. The only way your parents heard from you in school was if you got sick, got in trouble, or faked that you got sick.

Without getting too much into the whole fiasco, I think it is enough to say that had the school decided to kick off this celebration of diversity by reciting the pledge in just about any other language, we probably would not have seen such an uproar. Arabs and Muslims are racism’s flavor of the week, and any and all bigotry against us is fair game. It goes unpunished, under-punished, or inversely punished, with those who exhibit the discrimination sometimes even getting an apology from a school principal.

Much of the uproar revolved around that all-important passage of the pledge: “One nation under God.” When translated into Arabic, “God,” as all Americans know, with much thanks to Fox News, becomes “allah.” I thought this would be a good opportunity to give a little linguistic/history lesson on the word. Now, I’m fairly qualified to engage in this, as I’m fluent in Arabic and hold a master’s degree in Middle East studies. I also hold a law degree, so you can safely believe everything I’m about to tell you.

1. The word “allah” is broken down in Arabic quite easily. It is a combination of the article “al” meaning “the” and the word “ilah meaning “god” (lower case g). So, it quite literally means “the god,” or “the one god,” or as we would say in

English, "God" (upper case G).

2. Arabic-speaking Christians and Jews use the word "allah" when referring to God. That is because "allah" is simply the Arabic word meaning "God." (see point #1)

3. The Arabic language predated the advent of Islam and the prophecy of Muhammad. That means the Arabs who followed the monotheistic Abrahamic faiths of Judaism and Christianity used the word "allah" before Muslims even came about. That is because "allah" is simply the Arabic word meaning "God."

4. Those same Arabic-speaking Christians and Jews populated much of the Middle East before Islam came about. In fact, when we read history books, we learn that early Muslims dealt directly with their Arabic-speaking Christian and Jewish neighbors in 7th-century Yemen, Arabia, Syria, Palestine, and Iraq. All of these groups would have used the word "allah," the Arabic word meaning "God."

5. Islam sees itself as the culmination of the Abrahamic tradition, worshiping the same god as Christians and Jews. So it would make perfect sense that the first Muslims, who spoke Arabic, would use the word "allah," as it is simply the Arabic word meaning "God."

6. The Arabic language is closely related to both Hebrew and Aramaic. In the Hebrew Bible, the name used for God is "Elohim." In fact, it is used over 2500 times to refer to the God of Israel. In Aramaic, the word for God is "elah," or sometimes "alaha." For instance, when Jesus, who spoke and spread his word in Aramaic, was on the cross, he cried out, "elah, elah, lama sabachtani!" ("God, God, why have you forsaken me!") Elohim, elah, alaha, allah. Do you hear the connection?

7. Oh, and on another unrelated note, despite the beliefs of many Americans, Jesus didn't speak English. In fact, no one spoke the English we know until around the 1400s. Oh, and Jesus didn't have blond hair and blue eyes. He was an olive-skinned man from Nazareth, Palestine. So, the next time you are paying for your gas and the bearded Arab man takes your money, look at him closely. That's what Jesus looked like.

8. If you live near a major American city, there is most likely an Arab church nearby (About 60% of America's Arabs are Christians, by the way). Go to its Arabic-language service when you have the time. You will hear "allah" over and over. Don't ask the priest for an apology.

9. Arabic is not an obscure language. At least 300 million people use it natively,

making it the fifth-most spoken language on Earth. It is also one of the six official languages of the United Nations. In America, it is spoken widely in many locales, including in Dearborn, Michigan, where English is optional.

I could go on, but I hope I have cleared some things up. To quickly review, "allah" is simply the word for "God," the same God of the Old and New Testaments. Arabic-speaking Christians and Jews use it. Since the Arabic language predated Islam, the word "allah" did as well. People were saying "allah" way before Muhammad was even born. Other Semitic languages use very similar words for "God." Finally, Jesus didn't look like Brad Pitt. He looked like Tony Shalhoub.

Much of the misunderstanding surrounding the word "allah" is the fault of Muslim Americans. When speaking or writing about Islam in English, they frequently use the word when they could just as easily say or write "God." So, to the Muslims of America, please do what you can to stop confusing your fellow countrymen. And, for Allah's sake, start loving America like the rest of us!

Next time, we will talk about numbers. That's right, those numbers I used to make my list are called "Arabic numerals." I probably shouldn't have said that. Those parents in Pine Bush might start complaining about math class too.

*** Amer Zahr is a Palestinian American comedian, writer, and speaker living in Michigan. He is also the editor of "The Civil Arab." Email Amer Zahr.***

 [Comment by Roger Epstein](#) by Louise S. [2015, Apr 23]
From: Roger Epstein

Thank you Louise, and Amer,

It is incredible how ignorant people are.

I had a rabbi and an imam do a talk in one of our Hawaii Forgiveness Project meetings, and the Rabbi would not acknowledge that he and the Imam were speaking of the same God.

I also remember a TV show where a woman was told that Jesus was a Jew, and she so refused to accept that she ran off the stage.

Good to have an organization to help educate so many in need.

With aloha, Roger
Roger H. Epstein

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 [Comment by Michelle Brenner](#) by Louise S. [2015, Apr 23]

Oh dear, what a shame. Ignorance and arrogance cause alot of trouble. YOu are a mench Roger, a true balanced soul.

Blessings to you,

love michelle

Michelle Brenner
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 [Comment by Wael Mohamed](#) by Louise S. [2015, Apr 23]

Thanks LOUISE for giving us the opportunity to read from Amer and Roger

As a Muslim I want to underscore the cause of confusion: Christian believes that Jesus is a God and son of the God while Muslims believe that Jesus is just a man, he is a prophet and messenger like Muhamed, Noah, Issac....etc

So we as Muslims use Allah as a word to distinguish between the jesus (the human) and the God (allah or elah)

With my best regards
From Egypt with much love and respect

Wael

Dr Wael Mohamed, MD, PhD
Please forgive the typos and brevity

 [Comment by Akbar Dr. Waseem Alladin](#) by Louise S. [2015, Apr 23]

Hi Louise, Amer and Roger,

Thank you very much for sharing. I read the quick lesson on the meaning of the word AL LAH with interest. To those who have studied their history and for some of us on this side of the world this is 'old hat' but it does highlight the ignorance including (and perhaps especially amongst some Muslims who IMHO in their ignorance and arrogance think they have a copyright on Allah ! In my native Malaysia I am told a non-muslim (esp a Christian) referring to God as Allah can be in trouble with some segments of the Muslim population), Finally, Vedic/Hindu historians and scholars of sanskrit will claim that the phrase 'arabic' numerals is strictly speaking incorrect. Those numerals are Vedic in origin and (mis)appropriated. But that discussion is for another time and another place.

Best wishes

Akbar

Dr Waseem Alladin

Founding Editor in Chief, Counselling Psychology Quarterly: An International Journal of Theory research and Practice

 [Comment by Santhidran](#) by Louise S. [2015, Apr 23]

Hi Loiuise,

I am Malayisan. Non Muslim not allowed to use the word Allah in Malaysia.

Regards

Santhidran

Sincerely

Santhidran, PhD

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 [Comment by J. I. \(Hans`\) Bakker](#) by Louise S. [2015, Apr 23]

Dear colleagues,

The ruling by a court in Malaysia that says that it is illegal to use the word Allah in a Roman Catholic publication is extremely disturbing.

Does that also mean that there is no possibility of Muslims in Malaysia using English words like "God" or "Lord"?

Santhidran a/I Sinnappan states this as if it is a simple fact. He says: "I am Malaysia. Non Muslims are not allowed to use the word Allah in Malaysia."

But there are several stories on line about this court decision.

I understand what is happening of course. No President of the U.S. would ever risk saying: "Allah bless America!"

The irony for Malaysia (and Indonesia) is that very few Muslims really know Arabic. A small percentage can read Qur'an in Arabic.

A further irony is that the word "Tuan" (meaning "Lord") is also used for foreign men. I am often called "tuan Hans" (meaning, Mr. Hans).

Orthodox Jews honor the word YHWH by not saying it. They use the English "God" when speaking English (American, Canadian). But many Jews write that word as "G-d", dropping the "o" as a kind of way of being respectful to YHWH, which has no vowels.

The actual Arabic is "al ilah" (as we have learned). The spelling "Allah" is strictly English and is not strictly Arabic.

So if I were a court justice in Malaysia I would try to find a compromise by prohibiting the writing of the word "al ilah" in Arabic script in any English publication that is meant strictly for those who absolutely do not know Arabic.

This kind of thing bothers me a great deal. How can we have any kind of ecumenical thinking if those who have only one language assume that their use of an English spelling of a word in a Malaysian language publication is wrong?

I am sure there are many people in Malaysia who are happy with this decision. But if they are going to be consistent they must reject words derived from Latin which have theological significance, words like "theology" and "soteriology." Indeed, to be really consistent they should be absolutely 100% fluent in early Arabic script.

I hope that the higher courts will reverse this decision. As far as I know no such ruling exists in Indonesia. It may be true in Aceh Province.

Sincerely, but with a heavy heart,

Hans J. I. Bakker



 [Comment by Rachel Sing-Kiat Ting](#) by Louise S. [2015, Apr 23]

Hi Louise,

THanks for sending this email chain to me. Yes, I acknowledge this is such an interesting yet controversial discussion amid the international scholars. But I think there's "more" to the undercurrent of such diversity of linguistic expression, which is the "power" issue. The word "allah" is neutral, of course in the semantic sense, and it could mean "god" in a literal sense. But when it comes to political realm, it is no longer the problem of "translation", but the problem of "suggestion". In Malaysia, Muslims are the majority in the country, and they like to "own" the word "Allah" for their god, and that's why they prohibit the usage of "allah" when Christians tried to translate the bible into Malay language (they are afraid Muslim will be converted if they confused their allah with Christian allah). This has been an ungoing discrimination and injustice done to the CHristian community in Malaysia (which is the minority group), because many churches has been ransacked, and the bible had been taken away for the reason of using "allah" in the text. Not all Muslims countries shared similar freedom, that's why experience in Egypt, Indonesia, UAE, are different from Malaysia. That's why I also don't feel safe talking about this in the public listserve, because those answering the questions are mainly Muslim scholars who hold the power.

Where as in the US, the discrimination is reversed, because Christian holds the main power, and Muslims are minority. So the word "allah" becomes a sensitive issue on the media, even it means literally "god".

I don't think us cultural psychologists can do much about changing the "power structure" that dictates the language usage, but just to be more "aware" of such power structure and not to become the "abuser" or "perpetrator" is good enough.

Hope I am not offending anyone here.

Xinjie

Rachel Sing-Kiat Ting
China University of Political Science



 [Comment by Michelle Brenner](#) by Louise S. [2015, Apr 24]

thought this could add to the conversation.

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From: zalman@togetherforhumanity.org.au
Date: Thu, 23 Apr 2015 12:43:54 +1000
Subject: Christian use of the word Alla
To: brennermichelle@hotmail.com

Dear Michelle,

Some time ago I had a discussion with a group of Malaysian leaders including two members of the Malaysian Parliament.

The Malaysians explained their perspective on the issue of Christians using the word Allah.'The word Allah is an Arabic word for God, rather than Malay. In some parts of Malaysia the word Allah has become used by Christians over time, and they will be allowed to continue to use the word Allah under the law. However, there appeared to be deliberate move to use the word Allah by some Christians who had never used the word before for the purpose of proselyting and blurring the lines between Islam and Christianity. The law sought to require them to use the Malay word for God to prevent this deception'.

From a Jewish perspective I would add that Jewish communities were concerned when groups like Jews for Jesus or others sought to portray themselves as a from of Judaism which we saw as dishonestly seeking to persuade people to embrace a belief on the false premise that it is not significantly different from what they already believe. From an Interfaith perspective, I respect people's right to define themselves however they believe to be right, eg. a Christian who genuinely believes that what he practices is 'fulfilled Judaism" should have the freedom to say that, provided that it is honest rather than an attempt to mislead others.

warm regards

Zalman

 [Comment by Waseem Alladin](#) by Louise S. [2015, Apr 27]



Hi All,

Thank you Michelle and Zalman for sharing the deception perspective to the use of Allah by some people/ groups.

Best wishes



Akbar

Dr Waseem Alladin